Chapter 5

Observations and Conclusions

In late March 1943, spring rains and mud halted operations on the Russian Front. This seasonal intermission marked a major turning point in the Russo-German War. Although unknown at the time, the German Kharkov counteroffensive was, as Manstein later remarked, "the last German victory in the East."[1]

During the first two years of the war, the Germans had regarded defensive combat as an unpleasant corollary to their own offensive designs; however, from mid-1943 onward, the war became for the Germans a massive defensive encounter requiring entirely different strategies. Instead of pursuing victory, the Germans thereafter tried to ward off defeat. Concurrently, the development of German defensive doctrine became more deliberate as German commanders hoped to maximize their dwindling combat resources by constantly honing their doctrinal edge.

The German eastern armies began the Barbarossa campaign in June 1941 with a common textbook doctrine for defensive operations. The defensive methods that carried the Germans through the defensive battles from 1941 to early 1943 included a great deal of improvisation, as German units adapted their tactical procedures to novel Russian combat conditions. These procedures varied according to circumstance and were influenced by unforeseen problems arising from insufficient German combat strength, harsh weather, difficult terrain, Russian tactics, and Hitler's command interference.

The following remarks do not attempt to recapitulate all of the major points previously developed about the evolution of German defensive doctrine. Rather, they are some general reflections about doctrinal change in the German Army and the external factors that influenced those changes.

In practice, German defensive operations never corresponded exactly to prewar doctrine. In no single campaign or engagement did German battlefield performance on the Eastern Front between 1941 and 1943 adhere to the visions of *Truppenführung* and other prewar manuals. This is because peacetime preparations can never anticipate the exact circumstances of combat. Thus, in war, the tactical methods learned during peacetime maneuvers simply do not survive intact, and individual soldiers and whole units must quickly learn to adapt themselves to battlefield conditions. In accordance with this necessity, the German Army, like any army stepping from peacetime into wartime, was forced to alter its visions to reflect actual battlefield circumstances.

At the outset of the Russo-German War, German defensive doctrine was based on the system of elastic defense in depth adopted by the Imperial German Army in the latter part of World War I. Later in World War II, when German divisions discovered that some of their doctrinal theories did not work well under Russian battlefield conditions, widespread doctrinal improvisations followed. During the war's early years, the German Army adhered to the doctrinal principles of the Elastic Defense as detailed in the 1933 manual *Truppenführung* insofar as possible, relying on local commanders to make any necessary adjustments to suit their own circumstances. As the war continued, however, *Truppenführung*'s methodology was increasingly superseded by more widespread modifications resulting from the peculiar conditions of combat on the Russian Front. However, despite these modifications to German defensive practices, *Truppenführung* remained in effect as the standard doctrinal reference until the end of the war.

Most doctrinal change was done informally, originating at the front lines where local commanders acted on their own initiative to correct inappropriate tactical methods. Whether in the use of strongpoints during the winter of 1941—42 or in the adoption of hundreds of other tactical techniques, the constant updating of German defensive methods was highly decentralized. Units worked out new procedures that became doctrine when drilled into replacements and when passed on to other units via combat reports.

This decentralization yielded both benefits and problems. The principal benefit was that German units adapted swiftly and automatically to the harsh realities of combat in Russia. During the difficult defensive fighting through the war's first winter, for example, the defensive methods were almost completely improvised. These improvisations, which probably saved the German armies from annihilation, owed less to published doctrine than to the insight, experience, and tactical judgment of local commanders. In contrast to the greater rigidity of the Red Army, the German adaptability was particularly apparent early in the war.

Like the Germans, the Soviets also adapted their own tactical methods as the war progressed. At the beginning of the war, however, the Red Army was far less able to implement timely adjustments than the German Army. The reason for this lag was that the Soviets trusted the professional discretion of their frontline commanders far less than did the Germans, even to the point of assigning political officers to most units as ideological overseers. While promoting patriotism and fanaticism in the ranks (often at gunpoint), these commissars frequently stultified the initiative of local commanders by making it safer to follow orders and to adhere to prescribed doctrine than to dare innovation. Attempts by such senior leaders as Zhukov and even Stalin to impose hasty doctrinal innovation from above, as by their tactical manifestos during the Soviet winter counteroffensives at the beginning of 1942, were far less effective than the German system of fostering change from below.

The rigidity of Soviet military thinking early in World War II thus stemmed less from an inability to recognize the needs of actual combat at the lowest levels than from an unwillingness to depart from approved methods for fear of political censure. This rigidity gradually eased, and by mid-1943, the Soviets showed themselves to be innovative and adaptable in their own right. (Significantly, following the offensive victories at Stalingrad and else-

where during the 1942—43 winter, Stalin authorized various reforms that explicitly rewarded and promoted the professionalism of Red Army officers. These included the wearing of distinctive insignia and gold braid, as well as a curtailment of the onerous commissar system—all signs of the new esteem in which Red Army officers were held.)

For the Germans, the major problem with decentralization was the enormous amount of doctrinal parochialism that developed as different units gradually adopted different procedures. This problem was to become especially acute later in the war, but already in 1943, units were creating their own vocabularies, control measures, and fighting techniques that were incompatible with those in use by other units on other sectors of the front. This gradually reduced the interoperability of German forces until, in the war's final years, the transfer of divisions from one army group or theater to another commonly resulted in substantial confusion over tactical methodology. The growing estrangement between the panzer forces and the infantry forces in the German Army over the use of armor in defensive operations was also a symptom of this problem, as each arm sought to perfect its own techniques and to protect its own prerogatives in the absence of centralized doctrinal guidance.

Though German defensive methods were a kaleidoscope of improvisation, certain basic principles remained constant throughout the war and formed the true heart of German doctrine. The German Army's defensive methods were derived from four basic principles: depth, maneuver, firepower, and counterattack. Through all the variations in defensive methods, these principles continued to guide German commanders in conducting their operations.

German units sought to create depth by every means possible, including the distribution of heavy weapons in depth, the construction of rearward defenses, and even the commitment of service troops to combat when necessary. As one German officer wrote after the war, "Depth of the friendly positions is always more important than density."[2]

Hitler constrained maneuver with his Führer Defense Order, pinning German forces in place regardless of the tactical situation. This eclipse outraged German commanders, who considered maneuver from the individual soldier on up as one of the essential ingredients of successful defense. Within the limits allowed by Hitler, German defensive actions remained remarkable for their small-unit maneuver, with units as small as squads and platoons scrambling about the battlefield to confront the enemy's main effort or to counterattack the Russian flanks.

Firepower, in the form of concentrated blows against critical targets, was another major principle that influenced operations. The Germans particularly relished sudden attacks by fire, whether by artillery or close-range small-arms fire from concealed positions, for their ability to shock superior attacking forces into sudden retreat.

Finally, the Germans regarded counterattack as perhaps the most potent of all the defenders' weapons. Almost all orders, training directives, and experience reports published during the entire war mentioned the "decisive" role of counterattack in restoring German defenses. German officers routinely set aside their best leaders, troops, and weapons as local reserves and, at the earliest opportunity, sent them crashing into the flank of any break-in. Speed

was emphasized more than mass, and for this reason, every unit in contact with the enemy from squad level up was trained to initiate its own counterattack as soon as possible without awaiting either orders from superiors or the arrival of reserve forces. Soviet local penetrations thus were stung by a swarm of counterattacks until the Russian attack stalled in place or was thrown back.

These basic principles—depth, maneuver, firepower, and counterattack—provided the common theoretical foundation on which local commanders built their own doctrinal adaptations. Even in the absence of strong central direction and even without an updated field manual to replace the 1933 *Truppenführung*, these simple principles served the Germans well as a general guide to tactical improvisation.

Many of the most important stimuli for doctrinal change had little or nothing to do with Soviet operations. German defensive doctrine was influenced as much by nonbattle factors as by Soviet tactical methods. For example, German strongpoint tactics during the 1941—42 winter did not result from an assessment of Soviet vulnerabilities. Rather, German units were drawn to village-based strongpoints because they lacked winter equipment and the manpower for a continuous linear defense and because Hitler insisted that the beleaguered forces stand fast. It was a lucky coincidence that the strongpoint defensive system denied the Russians access to road networks. That the Soviets neglected to annihilate more of the German strongpoints was also coincidental, stemming from certain erroneous Soviet strategic decisions and awkward operational techniques.

Adolf Hitler was also a major force that affected German doctrine. In almost every significant defensive battle fought by the German Army on the Eastern Front, German doctrinal conduct was hampered to some extent by the Führer's warped sense of priorities. From December 1941 onward, Hitler corrupted the traditional German concept of *Auftragstaktik* with his overbearing interference in the affairs of subordinate commanders. Another abiding millstone was the September 1942 Führer Defense Order, which codified rigid defense without retreat and curtailed much tactical maneuver.

Another source of change was the size, composition, and battle worthiness of the German Army. As seen, defensive tactics during the 1941—42 winter were dictated in part by the lack of adequate German infantry strength to man a continuous front. Weaponry and the organization of German units also helped to shape German methods. The lack of an effective, long-range antitank gun (except for the few 88-mm antiaircraft guns) turned German antiarmor defense into a test of individual courage and inventiveness, while the reduction in strength of most infantry divisions from nine to six battalions in 1942 reduced their defensive staying power and tactical flexibility. As the training proficiency of German units eroded, their abilities to fight according to the aggressive Elastic Defense principles also faded. The poor defensive performance of many new, half-trained divisions in 1942—43, together with the surprising sluggishness of many veteran units, compelled some German commanders to compromise their defensive schemes in order to accommodate the decreased efficiency of their forces. The surprisingly good performance of various ad hoc emergency units showed the soundness of basic defensive

principles but also necessitated enormous doctrinal compromises to minimize the severe organizational limitations of those units.

Soviet tactics did, of course, have some impact on German doctrinal development. German experience reports regularly updated commanders on the enemy's latest tactics and outlined possible countermeasures. The evolution of German antitank tactics is again a case in point. Before the war, German defensive doctrine considered enemy tanks to be of secondary importance; therefore, German defenses were designed primarily to arrest the momentum of an artillery-supported infantry attack. In Russia, the offensive power (and, considering the feeble German antitank weaponry, the virtual invulnerability) of Soviet armor far outweighed that of massed infantry in most cases. The winter counteroffensives in 1942—43 reflected a Russian awareness of this fact as well, as each major Soviet drive was spearheaded by a phalanx of armored units. Consequently, German commanders increasingly deployed their forces and drilled their troops to foil Soviet tank attacks as the first defensive priority, with less regard being paid to the threat of dismounted infantry.

Thus, while changes to Soviet tactics and equipment did prompt some German defensive responses, German methods were bent extensively by other factors as well. The evolution of German defensive doctrine on the Russian Front during World War II demonstrates that an army's fighting techniques are shaped not only by an awareness of "the threat," but also by its own organization, training posture, weapons, traditions, and command philosophy. Armed with a defensive doctrine that constantly changed in form but remained true to the underlying principles propounded in its doctrinal manuals, the German Army pitted its proven tactical adaptability against the growing resource weight of the Soviet Red Army from mid-1943 onward.